Ker Could be Called Victoria Clan

By JAMES K. NESBITT

SCOTTISH PIONEERS

A CENTURY AGO this year, there arrived in Victoria a 35-year-old Scot, Robert Ker.

He left his wife and two small children in Scotland, saying that if he liked it here he would send for them.

He was an accountant, and within a few weeks of his arrival he had been engaged by James Douglas, Governor of the Crown Colony of Vancouver Island.

Douglas and Ker became co-workers and close friends. Today, 100 years later, they have the same descendants—some of the great-great-great-grandchildren of Douglas are the great-great-grandchildren of Ker.

It was not long before Robert Ker knew he wanted to live here, and so sent for his wife and family. But before his letter reached Scotland the small son and daughter had died within a few days of each other, of diphtheria.

Her heart heavy with sorrow, Mrs. Ker came to Victoria alone—a long, long voyage—across the Atlantic to New York, across the Isthmus of Panama, up the Pacific coast to San Francisco and so, on to Victoria.

Oct. 2 of 1862 there was born, in Victoria, to Robert Ker and his wife, a son, and they called him David Russell, for Mrs. Ker had been Jessie Russell.

An official civil list, published in the 1860s, tells of Robert Ker's steady, quiet advancement in colonial life: "Entered the colonial service of British Columbia as clerk in the treasury, May, 1859; appointed to be chief clerk in the audit department of the colony, July, 1860; appointed acting auditor-general, June, 1864; and auditor-general, 1865."

EXPANDING FAMILY

For some years Mr. and Mrs. Ker lived in New Westminster—the capital of the Crown Colony of British Columbia—and there two more sons were born to them—Robert James Ker, Oct. 15, 1864 (died in London, 1919), and Thomas Arnot Ker, Oct. 22, 1866 (died in San Francisco, 1926). A fourth son was later born in Victoria.

ROBERT KER AND HIS WIFE took a full part in the social life of New Westminster. We find they were at a ball given by Governor Seymour: "Grand ball at New Westminster—The ball given by His Excellency the Governor of British Columbia far eclipsed anything of the kind ever given in either colony.

There was, however, much indignation at the way some young men acted when away from home.

"The gunboat Forward went up from Esquimalt, taking the fine band of the flagship for the purpose of performing on the occasion, but unfortunately the bandsmen who were allowed shore leave incurred the displeasure of naval authorities by their conduct, and were not permitted to appear. Their place was supplied by some of the former members of the Sapper band."

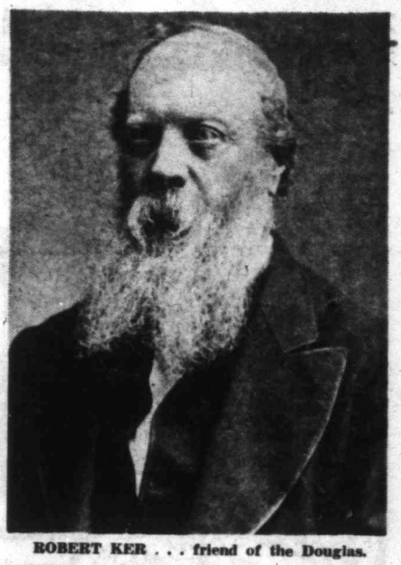
But the ball rolled on: "Dancing continued until midnight when the doors of the supper room were thrown open, disclosing one of the most elegant and tastefully arranged tables that we have ever seen at any entertainment. In the midst of the innumerable delicacies rose a magnificent silver-chased candelabrum which was the subject of universal admiration."

Quite inexhaustible, it would appear, were Governor Seymour's guests that night: "Supper ended . . . dancing was resumed, and maintained with the most determined vigor until 4 a.m."

MEMORABLE BALL

Yes, a memorable ball: "Considerable merriment was occasioned by the introduction of the coquettish old English dance, the 'Cotillion,' with looking-glass, cushion, streamers and umbrella. Loud bursts of laughter greeted each hopeful suitor for the momentary gratification of a waltz round the room, when, despite all the winning smiles at command, he found himself numbered among the 'rejected addresses,' and the pleasant task assigned him of holding an umbrella over his more favored rival—while enjoying the 'dizzy whirl'."

RETURNING TO LIVE in Victoria, Robert Ker chose acres in the Gorge district of today (Ker Avenue, Inez Drive, Davida Street), and he called the big farm "Ferniehirst," after an ancestral estate in Scotland. He continued in his



ROBERT KER . . . friend of the Douglas.

government service, riding horseback to the legislative buildings or sometimes coming down the Gorge waters by boat. He retired in 1874, and The Colonist noted: "Official changes — Robert Ker, for 15 years in government employ—provincial and Dominion—as auditor-general and paymaster-general will retire . . . upon a pension secured under the terms of union, for British Columbia officials whose services are not required by Canada. The duties of Mr. Ker's office will be discharged by John Grahame, assistant receiver-general. Mr. Ker bears with him into private life the esteem and good wishes of everybody."

In February of 1879, Robert Ker died, in the midst of a great snowstorm. He had gone out for provisions, fell from his horse, and was found dead in a snowdrift.

David Russell Ker was 16 when his father died. Suddenly he became the man of the house and soon thereafter he left school and went to California to study the milling business, and when he returned Henry Brackman gave young Ker a job at his mill at Saanich. That was the start of a memorable mercantile career.

VIGOROUS LEADER

Soon Ker and Brackman formed a partnership. By 1891, Brackman and Ker had built a gleaming new mill at the Outer Wharf, for years one of Victoria's landmarks: "The Saanich mills which have done such good service for 15 years, are superceded by a new and handsome structure in which is gathered together from all parts of Canada and the United States machines of the very latest patent. It is to the credit of the firm that in every instance possible they have obtained machines from Canada, and it speaks well for Canadian advancement and enterprise that so many articles of mechanical skill are being turned out in the Dominion."

David Ker had amazing energy and imagination, and he found time not only to build up his Victoria business, but to extend it to the mainland and across western Canada, and he somehow found time, too, for much community work—the YMCA, St. John's Church, the Board of Trade, the Agricultural Association, the Automobile Club.

In 1893 David Ker sent some of the products of his mill to the World's Fair at Chicago: "There were hundreds of exhibits at the World's Fair in Chicago of rolled oats, some millers having spent up to $25,000 in making one exhibit. Merit, however, was the qualification necessary for first place and in considering this the judges came to the conclusion that the quality of the rolled oats exhibit of the B. & K. Milling Company was ahead of that of any other brand in the world. They accordingly awarded it the gold medal for rolled oats."

David Ker headed the drive for the present YMCA building in Victoria: "The business interests of Victoria rallied behind D. R. Ker, who worked like a Trojan. President R. B. McMicking and chairman R. L. Drury not only gave almost their entire time, but had the loyal and unflagging support of a band of men and women, to whom failure was never admitted, even as a contingency."

In the agricultural society David Ker was a leading figure for years: "The official opening of the fair took place . . . when His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor and Mrs. Nelson, the premier, Hon. John Robson, and his Worship Mayor John Grant were shown through the buildings by the president, D. R. Ker, and the secretary, C. E. Renouf."

The Colonist thanked Mr. Ker for his hard work: "David R. Ker is the youngest president the agricultural society has ever had . . . he is a shrewd, energetic business man. For the last half dozen years he has taken a very deep interest in all matters appertaining to agriculture throughout the province. To the welfare of the association Mr. Ker has devoted a fortune in time, as well as a liberal expenditure in money. He proves himself to be the right man in the right place."

SUMPTUOUS DINNER

To say thanks to all those who had worked with him for the agricultural society, Mr. Ker gave a party, one of those wonderful 10-course affairs for which Victoria was famous in the 1890's: "D. R. Ker . . . entertained at a sumptuous dinner all his officers and co-directors, at the Delmonico, the affair being one of the most pleasant events which ever transpired in the capital. The dinner was in everything worthy of the man who gave it. A general good time was had in speechmaking and song-singing. It was close to 2 a.m. before the party broke up. All voted Mr. Ker a jolly good fellow—although still a bachelor."

However, he did not remain a bechelor too long after that—in 1894 he was married to Laura Agnes Heisterman, and for her he built Kershaugh, at the corner of Yates and Fernwood, and there were born to Mr. and Mrs. David Ker two sons and two daughters.

IN THE BOARD OF TRADE, Mr. Ker was a tower of strength: "A specially convened and largely attended meeting of the B.C. Board of Trade yesterday endorsed unanimously the resolution of D. R. Ker, urging the Dominion government to aid in the extension of the E. & N. to Comox by granting the usual subsidy of $3,200 a mile. President A. C. Flumerfelt was in the chair, attended by the vice-president, C. E. Renouf, and the secretary, F. Elworthy."

On one accasion D. R. Ker led a Board of Trade tour to the Kootenay country, and a special despatch came to The Colonist from Nelson: "The South Kootenay Board of Trade tendered the representatives of the B.C. Board a complimentary banquet at the Hotel Phair—an excellent menu had been prepared, which was disposed of with the musical accompaniment of the Nelson band—Messrs. W. Brown and A. C. Flumerfelt gave a topical song, with chorus, to the tune of 'Goodbye, My Lover, Goodbye,' in which a number of hits incidental to the trip were introduced."

PROGRESSIVE SPIRIT

Mr. Ker seized the opportunity to remind Victoria about what sometimes appeared to him to be its insularity of mind, as well as of geography: "Mr. R. E. Lemon proposed the toast 'to the members of the B.C. board'—president D. R. Ker, in reply, said that no body of men who had visited Kootenay had so much reason to feel ashamed of themselves as the members of the B.C. Board on account of their ignorance of the resources and the advancement made by Kootenay. He admitted that Victoria merchants had been slow in seeking trade relations with Kootenay, but they would like a trial, and if they cannot satisfy all reasonable demands they will be content to be called mossbacks."

D. R. Ker put a terrific amount into his comparatively brief life, and he took much out of it. He was by no means an old men when he died here in 1923.